

THE PATH TO SUPREME BLISS

Adapted from various sources

All human beings want to be happy. All human beings seek happiness. Man's search for happiness has gone on from age to age but it can never be found in the way it is sought in merely adjusting the conditions of the external world and ignoring the internal world of mind. The history of the world proves this. Social reforms, economic reforms, legal reforms, and political reforms, however well-intentioned and well-calculated they may have been, have never brought complete and genuine happiness to man. Why?

When one set of unsatisfactory conditions that have appeared has been eliminated, another rears its head, and when that is eliminated yet another appears. This appearance and re-appearance, this rise and fall is of the essence of all mundane things and conditions. There can never be any mass production of true happiness. It is

something personal and individual. It comes from within and not without. It is not so much the external world that one has to explore in the search for happiness as the internal world of mind.

Modern science declares that nothing in the universe is static. Everything is dynamic; everything is in motion. Nothing stands still. We either go forward or backward. We grow better and happier or else we grow in the direction of evil and thus accumulate sorrow. To be happy is to overcome sorrow. To overcome sorrow, the Buddha shows humanity the Path that leads to the eradication of all sorrows.

The path to happiness is the Noble Eightfold Path. This path must have been trodden by someone before it can be called a Path. There is inherent in the word 'Path' the idea that someone had trod it before.

A Path cannot come into existence all of a sudden. Someone must have first cut through a jungle, cleared a way and walked along it. Similarly, the Noble Eightfold Path has been trodden before by many a Buddha in the past. It has also been trodden before by many a Pacceka Buddha and many an Arahant. The Buddha only discovered the Path but did not create it, since it existed from the ancient past. Indeed it is an Ancient Path (*Purana Magga*).

The Noble Eightfold Path is a Path to be trodden. The path is something essentially practical. To know and experience this truth one must tread the path. This path contains a careful and wise collection of all the important

requisites necessary for the spiritual development of man.

The Noble Eightfold Path is sub-divided into three groups: Ethical Conduct, Mental Discipline and Wisdom (*Sila, Samadhi and Panna.*) This Path is unique to Buddhism and distinguishes it from every other religion and philosophy. It is the Buddhist code of mental and physical conduct which leads to the end of suffering, sorrow and despair; to perfect peace, *Nibbana*.

The eight factors of the Path are:

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| 1. Right Understanding (<i>samma-ditthi</i>) | } | Wisdom (<i>panna</i>) |
| 2. Right Thought (<i>samma-samkappa</i>) | | |
| 3. Right Speech (<i>samma-vaca</i>) | } | Ethical Conduct (<i>sila</i>) |
| 4. Right Action (<i>samma-kammanta</i>) | | |
| 5. Right Livelihood (<i>samma-ajiva</i>) | | |
| 6. Right Effort (<i>samma-vayama</i>) | } | Mental Discipline (<i>samadhi</i>) |
| 7. Right Mindfulness (<i>samma-sati</i>) | | |
| 8. Right Concentration (<i>samma-samadhi</i>) | | |

Referring to this Path, in the First Discourse, the Buddha called it the Middle Path (*majjhima patipada*), because it avoids two extremes: Indulgence in sensual pleasures which is low, worldly and leads to harm is one extreme; self torture in the form of severe asceticism which is painful, low and leads to harm is the other.

It must always be borne in mind that the term 'path' is only a figurative expression. Though conventionally we talk of treading a path, in the ultimate sense the eight steps signify eight mental factors. They are

interdependent and interrelated, and at the highest level they function simultaneously; they are not followed and practised one after the other in numerical order. Even on the lower level each and every factor should be tinged with some degree of right understanding; for it is the key-note of Buddhism.

In strong language the Buddha did warn his followers against mere book learning thus:

‘Though he recites the sacred texts a lot, but acts not accordingly that heedless man is like a cowherd counting others’ cattle (not obtaining the products of the cow). He shares not the fruits of the tranquil man.

‘Though he recites only a little of the sacred texts, but acts in accordance with the teaching, abandoning lust, hate and delusion, possessed of right understanding, his mind entirely released and clinging to nothing here or hereafter, he shares the fruits of the tranquil man.

The achievement of the final goal of Buddhism (*Nibbana*) does not call for a mastery over the deep and abstruse philosophy of Buddhism. What is required is a progressive development of the mind through a process of ethical conduct and meditation: *“Being established in moral conduct and training the mind, one realizes the knowledge which leads to deliverance,”* the Buddha declared.

Ethical Conduct

Now, in Ethical Conduct (*Sila*), based on love and

compassion, are included three factors of the Noble Eightfold Path: namely, Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood.

The Buddha expounded his teaching 'for the good of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world'.

Sila, the initial stage of the Path, is based on this loving compassion. Why should one refrain from harming and robbing others? Is it not because of love for self and others? Why should one succour the poor, the needy and those in distress? Is it not out of compassion for them?

To abstain from evil and do good is the function of *sila*, the code of ethical conduct taught in Buddhism. This function is never void of loving compassion. *Sila* embraces within it qualities of the heart, such as love, modesty, tolerance, pity, charity and happiness at the success of others.

According to Buddhism for a man to be perfect there are two qualities that he should develop equally: compassion (*karuna*) on one side, and wisdom (*panna*) on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance and such noble qualities on the emotional side or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for the intellectual side or the qualities of the mind. If one develops only the emotional neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool; while to develop only the intellectual side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hard-hearted intellect

without feeling for others. Therefore, to be perfect one has to develop both equally.

Right Speech means abstention

- from telling lies,
 - backbiting and slander and talk that may bring about hatred, enmity, disunity and disharmony among individuals or groups of people,
 - harsh, rude, impolite, malicious and abusive language, and
 - idle, useless and foolish babble and gossip.
- When one abstains from these forms of wrong and harmful speech one naturally has to speak the truth, has to use words that are friendly and benevolent, pleasant and gentle, meaningful and useful. One should not speak carelessly: speech should be at the right time and place. If one cannot say something useful, one should keep 'noble silence'.

Right Action is abstention from

- killing,
- stealing, and
- illicit sexual indulgence, and cultivating compassion, taking only things that are given, and living pure and chaste.

Right Livelihood is abandoning wrong ways of living which bring harm and suffering to others: Trafficking

- in arms and lethal weapons,
- in animals for slaughter,

- in human beings (i.e. dealing in slaves which was prevalent during the time of the Buddha),
 - in intoxicating drinks and
 - poisons,
- and living by a profession which is blameless and free from harm to oneself and others. One can clearly see here that Buddhism is strongly opposed to any kind of war, when it lays down that trade in arms and lethal weapons is an evil and unjust means of livelihood.

It should be realized that the Buddhist ethical and moral conduct aims at promoting a happy and harmonious life both for the individual and for society. This moral conduct is considered as the indispensable foundation for all higher spiritual attainments. No spiritual development is possible without this moral basis. These moral principles aim at making society secure by promoting unity, harmony and right relations among people.

In Buddhism ethical conduct is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end. Perfect conduct divorced from a purpose, not directed to a desirable end, has but little meaning from the Buddhist point of view. Not only evil but also good must be transcended. Even the Teachings of the Buddha have to be transcended. The Buddha has compared His Teachings to a raft to be used by us *nissaranatthaya* i.e. for the purpose of crossing over in safety, and — *nagahanatthaya* — i.e. not for the purpose

of retention. Once we have reached the other shore, we do not have to carry the raft with us. It has to be put aside.

Mental Discipline

Next comes Mental Discipline, in which are included three other factors of the Eightfold Path: namely Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

Right Effort is the persevering endeavour

- to prevent the arising of evil and unwholesome thoughts that have not yet arisen in a man's mind,
- to discard such evil thoughts already arisen,
- to produce and develop wholesome thoughts not yet arisen and
- to promote and maintain the good thoughts already present.

The function of Right Effort, therefore, is to be vigilant and check all unhealthy thoughts, and to cultivate, promote and maintain wholesome and pure thoughts arising in a man's mind.

The prudent man who masters his speech and his physical actions through *sila* (Ethical Conduct) now makes every endeavour to scrutinize his thoughts, his mental factors, and to avoid distracting thoughts.

Right Mindfulness is to be diligently aware, mindful and attentive with regard to

- the activities of the body (*kaya*),

- sensations or feelings (*vedana*),
- the activities of the mind (*citta*) and
- ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things (*dhamma*).

The practice of concentration on breathing (*anapanasati*) is one of the well-known exercises, connected with the body, for mental development. There are several other ways of developing attentiveness in relation to the body — as modes of meditation.

With regard to sensations and feelings, one should be clearly aware of all forms of feelings and sensations, pleasant, unpleasant and neutral, of how they appear and disappear within oneself.

Concerning the activities of mind, one should be aware whether one's mind is lustful or not, given to hatred or not, deluded or not, distracted or concentrated, etc. In this way one should be aware of all movements of mind, how they arise and disappear.

As regards ideas, thoughts, conceptions and things, one should know their nature, how they appear and disappear, how they are developed, how they are suppressed, and destroyed, and so on.

The third and last factor of Mental Discipline is Right Concentration leading to the four stages of *Jhana*, generally called trance or *recueillement*. In the first stage of *Jhana*, passionate desires and certain unwholesome thoughts like sensuous lust, ill-will, languor, worry, restlessness, and doubt are discarded, and feelings of joy and happiness are maintained, along with certain mental

activities. In the second stage, all intellectual activities are suppressed, tranquility and 'one-pointedness' of mind developed, and the feelings of joy and happiness are still retained. In the third stage, the feeling of joy, which is an active sensation, also disappears, while the disposition of happiness still remains in addition to mindful equanimity. In the fourth stage of *Jhana*, all sensations, even of happiness and unhappiness, of joy and sorrow, disappear, only pure equanimity and awareness remaining.

Thus the mind is trained and disciplined and developed through Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.

Wisdom

The remaining two factors namely, Right Understanding and Right Thought go to constitute Wisdom.

Thought includes thoughts of renunciation (*nekkhamma-samkappa*), good will (*avyapada-samkappa*) and of compassion or non-harm (*avihimsa-samkappa*). These thoughts are to be cultivated and extended towards all living beings irrespective of race, caste, clan or creed. As they embrace all that breathes there are no compromising limitations. The radiation of such ennobling thoughts is not possible for one who is egocentric and selfish.

A man may be intelligent, erudite and learned, but if he lacks right thoughts, he is, according to the teachings of the Buddha, a fool (*bala*) not a man of

understanding and insight. If we view things with dispassionate discernment, we will understand that selfish desire, hatred and violence cannot go together with true Wisdom. Right Understanding or true Wisdom is always permeated with right thoughts and never bereft of them.

Right Understanding is the understanding of things as they are, and it is the Four Noble Truths that explain things as they really are. Right Understanding therefore is ultimately reduced to the understanding of the Four Noble Truths. This understanding is the highest wisdom which sees the Ultimate Reality.

According to Buddhism there are two sorts of understanding: What we generally call understanding is knowledge, an accumulated memory, an intellectual grasping of a subject according to certain given data. This is called 'knowing accordingly' (*anubodha*). It is not very deep. Real deep understanding is called 'penetration' (*pativedha*), seeing a thing in its true nature, without name and label. This penetration is possible only when the mind is free from all impurities and is fully developed through meditation.

Right Understanding or penetrative Wisdom is the result of continued and steady practice of meditation or careful cultivation of the mind. To one endowed with Right Understanding it is impossible to have a clouded view of phenomena, for he is immune from all impurities and has attained the unshakable deliverance of the

mind (*akuppa ceto vimutti*).

Keep to the Path

These sayings of the Buddha explain the function and the purpose of cultivating ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom. Deliverance means living experience of the cessation of the three root causes of evil, Greed, Hatred and Delusion or Ignorance (*lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*), that assail the human mind. These root causes are eliminated through ethical conduct, mental discipline and wisdom.

Thus it is clear that the Buddha's teaching aims at the highest purification, perfect mental health, free from all tainted impulses.

Now this deliverance from mental taints, this freedom from ill, lies absolutely and entirely in a man's own hands, in those of no one else, human or divine. Not even a Supreme Buddha can redeem a man from the fetters of existence except by showing him the path.

The path of *Sila*, *Samadhi*, *Panna* are sometimes referred to as the threefold training (*tividhasikkha*) and none of them is an end in itself; each is a means to an end. One cannot function independently of the others. As in the case of a tripod which falls to the ground if a single leg gives way, so here one cannot function without the support of the others. These three go together supporting each other. *Sila* or Ethical Conduct strengthens Mental Discipline and Mental Discipline in turn promotes Wisdom. Wisdom helps one to get rid of the clouded view of things — to see life as it really is —

that is to see life and all things pertaining to life as arising and passing away.

In spite of the scientific knowledge that is steadily growing the people of the world are restless and racked with fear and discontent. They are intoxicated with the desire to gain fame, wealth, power and to gratify the senses. To this troubled world still seething with hate, distrust, selfish desire and violence, most timely is the Buddha's Message of love and understanding, the Noble Eightfold Path, leading to the realization of Nibbana. A mere knowledge of the Path, however complete, will not do. In this case, our function is to follow it and keep to it.

The path is indeed difficult, but if we, with constant heedfulness, and complete awareness, walk it watching our steps, we will one day reach our destination. A child learns to stand and walk gradually and with difficulty. So too have all great ones moved from stage to stage through repeated failure to final success. It is a Path leading to the realization of Ultimate Reality, to complete freedom, happiness and peace through moral, spiritual and intellectual perfection.

From this brief account of the Path, one may see that it is a way of life to be followed, practised and developed by each individual. It is self-discipline in body, word and mind, self-development and self-purification. It has nothing to do with belief, prayer, worship or ceremony. ■